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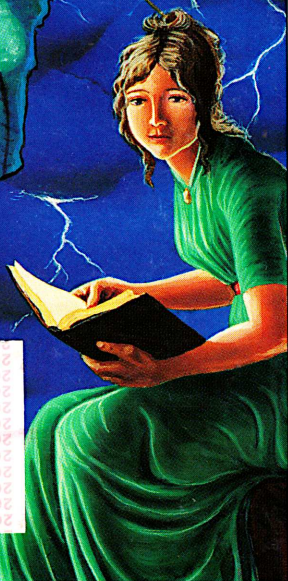
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AMERICAN STYLE



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SHAPESHIFTING- American Style

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**Was it a childhood memory, and earnest desire,
of lessons from a famous sorcerer that
changed her into another person?
More importantly, what good was it?**

By Wanda Sue Parrott

 In 1944, when I was a nine-year-old child in Alhambra, California, the Second World War was still raging against both Germany and Japan. My parents were air raid wardens for our block where middle-class whites lived about eight miles northeast of downtown Los Angeles.

Of necessity, our lifestyles were fairly austere. Rationing of sugar, milk, meat, butter and other foodstuffs we take for granted today forced us to supplement our diets with such unpalatable home-grown things as okra, rutabaga and turnips, all harvested from "victory gardens" in our back yards.

Because commodities like steel, metal, oil, gasoline and rubber were primarily directed toward our country's defense effort, we made do by foregoing pleasure drives into the country, where orange and walnut groves, and vast acres of wild strawberries grew in abundance.

Japanese-Americans, who were interred in detention camps for "the duration," had previously owned the now-abandoned strawberry fields. Where were these people we had never seen? What were they doing? Why were they there? This was a topic about which we youngsters wondered, but for which we received no

answers from our parents, who did not seem to want to talk about it.

The children of wartime America listened to the radio for entertainment, but mainly we entertained ourselves by playing cards, kick-the-can, hide-and-seek and tag. We also added a touch of mystery and magic to our lives by concocting our own ghost stories, which we whispered to each other in the dark.

Because we had all seen wartime propaganda posters, many of our ghost tales centered around the characters from the pictures that hung in the post office and were plastered in full-color on the back pages of our parents' magazines. The "enemy" had shiny, dark, oval eyes, broad, high cheekbones and huge, oversized teeth exposed in a leer that I mistook for a smile. He was attired in a khaki-colored uniform with dark spots.

In my child's mind, the Japanese soldier resembled a frog. As I was extremely fascinated by frogs, which transformed from black polliwogs to four-legged tadpoles before losing their tails and hopping out of the water, these people who reminded me of frogs remained alluringly mysterious to me. I liked the alleged enemy, but dared not voice this viewpoint aloud.

• • •

A TRIP TO A LAND OF WONDER

The war years created a pronounced generation gap between adults and children. They had their secrets. We had ours. On rare occasions, however, the barriers came down and everyone joined together to participate in something special. When the circus came in September, I was there for the opening night.

After sitting under a canvas tent so crammed with people we sweltered from body heat, chomping on salted peanuts from red-and-white-striped paper bags, we carried our memories of dancing bears, prancing elephants, roaring tigers, clowns, and trapeze artists who flew without nets into the cool evening air, where we strolled the midway.

My father, Ray Childress, held my hand. My mother, Lois, held my little sister Jan's hand. The neon lights, the tinny sound of piped hurdy-gurdy music, the huge, stuffed animals hanging from the walls of makeshift dart-throwing booths combined to make me dizzy with excitement, but when we came to the side-show attraction, I was euphoric.

Painted in a large scrawl on a canvas backdrop, in front of which several bleached blondes in scanty costumes were wiggling their wares, was a sign that said: *The Amazing Frogman*. Beneath



it was a grotesque picture of a huge green frog in human clothing. Its eyes bulged and its closed mouth appeared to be full of something—maybe huge teeth just like those in the propaganda posters.

I had been raised to be polite and never to ask for money which would be spent on foolishness. But now I could not resist saying what I did. "Let's go!"

Mother was not interested. Nor was Daddy. And my four-year-old sister was too young. I persisted. "Please, oh please," I urged, trying to drag my six-foot three-inch father toward the sideshow barker who had finished his ballyhoo and was now selling tickets.

To my surprise, Daddy pressed a dime in my hand and said they would meet me at the exit.

Never had I seen anything so wonderful. First there was the pickled fetus of a two-headed calf displayed in front of a black curtain. It rested like a chunk of meat in a huge glass jar filled with formaldehyde. The next exhibit featured the smallest man in the world, a shriveled little creature who looked like a gnome.

The third exhibit housed a gigantic woman in a flowered dress whose body was so large it hung down in flaps almost to the sawdust that covered the floor. That sawdust had been all it took

to transform the empty lot near the railroad tracks into a fairyland.

Finally, the crowd reached its destination, a semi-circle of wooden bleachers around a platform in the center of which was half a rain barrel with its bottom facing the top of the tent. As soon as we were seated on the rickety wood planks, a tall man in a yellow-and-white-striped cutaway coat and dingy white trousers dimmed the lights and began saying something like:

"What you are about to see, folks, is real. This man was born with the brain of a frog and the body of a human being. He is a true freak of nature because he lives as both man and frog in the same body. He will transform before your very eyes. You must be absolutely quiet and do not take pictures, clap or try to talk to him because he may suffer a fatal heart attack and die on the spot. When he has turned into a frog, kindly exit quietly from the rear of the tent.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, the Amazing Frogman..."

A trim, muscular medium-sized white-haired man approximately 60 years of age, clad in tight-fitting green trunks strode swiftly from behind the curtains and stepped onto the barrel. His legs, torso and arms emanated a green sheen and his skin ap-

peared covered with shadowy dark bumps, but his pale face was unblemished. He bowed, straightened up and then slowly turned in a full circle, exposing his back. His mottled skin looked just like the hide on a gigantic bullfrog.

Dropping to his haunches, he crouched motionless while an eerie light came into his wide-open eyes, which slowly changed shape until his eye sockets bulged and his pupils seemed to pop out about one inch.

Suddenly, Frogman's mouth flapped open, forming a round gaping hole from which his snake-like tongue darted, as if catching a fly. Snap! Frogman's lower jaw closed so completely his bottom lip was thrust up and over his nose. He swallowed half his face and then his true transformation began. His cheeks puffed up as his chest broadened until it was pulsating with a visible throbbing movement that caused his skin to heave in and out.

Then he gave one long chirruping croak, hopped off the barrel and out of view.

Before I could gasp in awe, the master of ceremonies was directing the audience toward the exit from which I would return to reality as a changed person, a pre-pubescent initiate into the mysteries of life.

The circus hands tore down their

big top, dismantled their gear and stowed everything including wild animals in rubber-tired cages and people in truck-bed trailers, and rolled out of town. They left the lot as empty as it had always been. What had changed was my mind. No longer did I think only about things other people told me; I now conducted secret dialogues with myself.

ACTING UNCOUTH

Did Frogman trick me? *Maybe his act had not been a trick!* Did he really have a frog's brain? Yes. *In school we learned that human embryos develop reptilian brains which later become human.* If a man can turn into a frog, can a child do the same thing? *Yes!* How? *By finding the secret!* What can I do to discover the secret? *Imitate the one who practices it!* Frogman? Yes. *Practice turning into a frog!*

The self-initiated rituals that ensued were shared with only my own image, which peered out of my dresser mirror as I huffed, puffed, panted and practiced deep breathing, all of which failed to make my eyes, cheeks and chest bulge more than a fraction of an inch.

Sticking out my tongue, I stretched my mouth until it looked like a gaping hole and juggled my jaw in vain attempts to swallow the lower half of my face. But the only thing I succeed-

ed in doing was touching the tip of my nose with my tongue. This achievement was so monumental that I executed my performance in front of my mother who found it indecent and ordered me to stop acting so uncouth.

Many years passed and my only transformation was growing taller, wider and older. While childhood questions about transformation remained unanswered, they were never dismissed entirely, despite the fact that logic (and my own failed attempts to turn into a frog) indicated people like Frogman were fabulous fakes or outright frauds.

I MEET CARLOS

Then, in 1957, my cousin Margaret Evelyn Runyan introduced me to a young man from South America who believed so deeply in magic that he would later kick off a revolution in spiritual consciousness that spread across America and around the world.

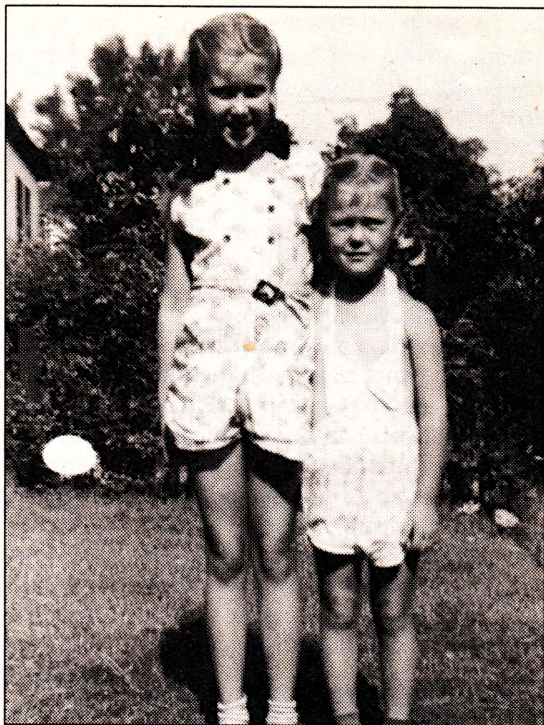
One midsummer night, Margaret invited me to have dinner with Carlos Aranha and her. My cousin's friend, who had a strong Hispanic accent, was a Los Angeles City College student who claimed to have come from Brazil. Carlos said he was 28, which made him six years older than I and seven years younger than Margaret.

Although he was about half a head shorter than Margaret, Carlos

was physically fit, with broad shoulders and musculature which made him appear larger than he actually was. Everything about him shone: his dark, curly hair, dazzling white teeth and smiling, bright, brown impish eyes.

When he met us at Margaret's South La Brea Avenue apartment, situated above a bowling alley, Carlos gave us a bottle of wine which, when ingested on empty stomachs, induced a rapid state of elevated group consciousness. Soon we were singing, holding hands and dancing in circles, cracking jokes, doubling over in laughter and, finally, collapsing like beanbags on the carpet where, seated cross-legged, Carlos charmed us with tales of magic and mystery.

Carlos' tales of *Indiana americana* introduced me to shapeshifting and those who practiced it. The North American Indian medicine men allegedly attuned with and even assumed the forms of bears, bison and wolves, while South American shamen transformed into everything from



Wanda Sue Parrott (L), age 9, and sister Janice Rae Childress Rau in 1944, the year Wanda began experimenting with shapeshifting.

snakes, bats, leopards, crocodiles and alligators to birds.

Although his presentation was overly dramatic and, therefore, smacked of the preposterous, Carlos' seemingly tall tales made sense: the practitioners of shapeshifting were empowered with one chief responsibility—ensuring the welfare of their people.

These privileged few, who had
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mastered secret laws beyond the ken of ordinary mortals, occupied special positions as caretakers and overseers of their tribes, nations or people. For example, one fleet-footed wolf could outrun a passel of Indian braves on foot or horseback, swiftly killing a large animal by leaping toward and sinking its fangs into the animal's jugular vein, thus feeding many hungry people with minimal expenditure of human effort.

As a bird soaring aloft, the medicine man or shaman could spot approaching danger many miles away, thus enabling his people to protect themselves against intrusion or flee the scene before disaster struck.

The subject of humans-turned-amphibian did not arise. I let sleeping frogs lie as Carlos spun dreams of human possibility, of magic and sorcery. As he talked, Carlos' eyes were luminous, emanating an inner glow I had only seen once before: Frogman had looked like this just before he shifted his shape. Clearly, Carlos not only believed humans could transform themselves into magicians and sorcerers, he hoped to someday prove it could be done by mastering the secret principles himself!

Some time between midnight and dawn, we fell across Margaret's Murphy bed. We slept side by side,

fully clothed, like three burned-out candles. Our heads hung off one edge of the mattress and our feet stuck over the other side. When we awakened, we were still human. And we were famished because we had totally forgotten about going out for pizza.

After Carlos had left, Margaret asked, "Do you believe those things he told us last night?"

"Do you?" I responded. It was a question I would avoid answering for many years to come.

FREEDOM OR POWER?

Carlos became a member of our family in January 1960 when he and Margaret were married. By this time, he had transferred to UCLA where, as a student of anthropology, he had begun taking trips into Mexico to collect old bones and other research. At about this time he also claimed to have met an old Yaqui Indian from whom he was learning Indian magic.

One Sunday afternoon in 1961, Margaret, Carlos and I were invited by my parents for one of my mother's delicious home-made fried chicken dinners. While Mother was cooking, the rest of us sat in the living room making small talk. Suddenly Carlos disappeared. Poof! One moment he was there. The next minute he was gone.

We searched the house, yard

and neighborhood, but found no visible trace of him. Mother announced, with consternation, that dinner would proceed without Carlos. As we approached the dining room table, Carlos reappeared in our midst.

"Carlitos, just where in the hell have you been?" Margaret asked.

Flashing a winsome bright-eyed smile, he responded, "Out walking, Mees Ronyan."

His dramatic remanifestation was perfectly timed. He arrived so silently he might have been a featherweight bird, but Carlos ate with the gusto of a healthy horse. Mother, a practical realist from the Midwest, was not amused by Carlos' demonstration and he was never invited again to our family home.

A year later I was following in the footsteps of my literary role model, John Steinbeck, by visiting places about which he had written. I was staying in the farming community of Bakersfield, California, setting of Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, when Carlos popped in for a shocking surprise visit.

By then, he had been a sorcerer's apprentice for two years and may have been practicing a controlled dreaming exercise involving a combination of visualization, transmutation and thought projection.

While asleep one night, I found myself in a dreamlike vision in which I was seated at the counter of a restaurant. The stools were orange. A shadowy figure in a hooded robe suddenly appeared, laid a bundle that looked like a baby wrapped in a blanket on the seat beside me, and vanished.

An overwhelming maternal instinct swelled through me, and I lifted the abandoned infant, but before caressing it I pulled on the edge of the blanket to uncover its sweet little face. Sweet, my eye! The thing was a hideous monstrosity, a froglike little human body with a gigantic bulging head and Carlos' face. The eyes flashed and the mouth opened into a laughing smile, but there was no sound that came from the lips.

I recoiled in fear, laid the bundle down on the seat and stated, "Oh, no, Carlos! You can't play your tricks on me." I walked out of the restaurant and into my own reality. *I was wide awake, shaking with cold, yet perspiring so profusely my forehead was awash with moisture.*

From the depth of my discomfort, a voice whispered one thought into my mind's inner ear: *The path of true magic leads to freedom; the path of false magic leads to power. Which do you choose?*

Freedom through understanding of truth, I responded, and from

that day forward never again wondered if I might eventually succeed at becoming anything but a better human being.

A NEW NAME

By the mid-1960s I was finally starting to succeed as a magazine and newspaper writer, when Carlos whizzed past me like a shooting star. Now a Ph.D., his doctoral dissertation, which detailed his apprenticeship to Don Juan in the Yaqui way of life, had been published as a book entitled *The Teachings of Don Juan* under his new name: Carlos Castaneda.

Carlos' meteoric rise to spiritual and literary stardom catapulted him to the exalted position of guru of the West. His books, never publicized as new-age treatments of age-old shapeshifting, eclipsed the world's best-known legends about transformation by making phenomena that had heretofore been considered mere mythological poppycock seem like everyday occurrences that could happen to every man.

Although Carlos' works were the best known of their genre, a paperback published during Castaneda's heyday gave more direct, comprehensive treatment to the subject of shapeshifting. *Werewolves, Shapeshifters and Skinwalkers* by Marika Kriss (Sherbourne Press) enjoyed a short life

as part of the *For the Millions Series* which has been out of print since the mid-1970s.

How did a man who worked in a men's clothing store, drove a taxicab, delivered liquor and performed numerous other odd jobs to put himself through college in a nation whose language was not his native tongue, attain godlike status in the scientific age? Carlos may have provided the answer himself in his claim: *I became a crow!*

If Carlos' allegation were true, he was the only solid flesh-and-blood human on earth who had the courage to declare publicly that he could use mind to drastically alter his material form. Followers by the thousands longed to meet Carlos in person, to see for themselves a demonstration of his powers, but the little guru who had become a giant simply disappeared.

The apparent reluctance of the man who initiated readers into life's mysteries, but abstained from serving otherwise as their leader, led to a public outcry. Had Carlos, who allegedly was worth millions, hoodwinked the world? Did he trick UCLA into granting him a doctorate? If he had truly attained magician's status, as he claimed, he should come forward and perform his incredible feat of turning into a crow before the eyes of the world.

By the time Carlos made the cover of *Time* magazine, whose intrepid team of researchers attempted in vain to uncover the full facts about his background, my journalistic career had finally begun to take off. As an investigative reporter with *The Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, covering everything from parapsychology and metaphysics to new age religious movements that were coming into their own, I could have written an inside scoop based on first-hand acquaintance with Carlos; however, I abstained. Why?

First, according to *Time*, Carlos possibly hailed from Peru rather than Brazil, as he claimed; second, since he was claiming to be about 35 years of age, and I was then 37, he was now younger than I. Miraculous transformation? Bald-faced lie was a better description.

Convinced that the man I had known 15 years, but about whom I really knew nothing, was perhaps the greatest con artist of the century, I wrote Carlos Aranha Castaneda out of my book of life. Over the next few years, my only contact with Carlos was in memory.

ENTER MADAME FOO LING

In 1974, Margaret had moved to Tempe, Arizona, and was in the process of filing for divorce

from Carlos; despite their 14 years of marriage, they had not actually lived together for many years. Ironically, her spacious new townhouse was set in the middle of the Valley of the Sun, a geographical area containing the greatest number of Castaneda fans *per capita* in the nation. Although Carlos was not physically present, his spirit certainly was evident among the young people who looked up to him as an idol.

One September afternoon I visited Margaret, whose bright airy house was furnished with the same antiques, bric-a-brac and paintings that had been crowded into her tiny walk-up efficiency unit the night a bottle of wine allowed our spirits to soar while Carlos introduced me to the ancient science of shape-shifting. We reminisced over old times.

Suddenly Margaret blurted out a question I wasn't expecting. "Do you think Carlos can really turn into a crow?" There was a strange light coming from her eyes, an intensity that seemed to demand an answer. Not any answer. *The right answer.*

Caught completely off guard, I mumbled in non-response that I must visit the restroom, and hurried away. In the thirty seconds required to reach my destination, something astonishing had happened. I had completely changed in appearance. Staring back from



The author, Wanda Sue Parrott

the mirror was a total stranger with an Oriental face reminiscent of a portrait I had seen on a propaganda poster many, many years before. But that face had been male. This was female.

Her eyes were uncannily bright and she radiated such an aura of pleasantness that I was instantly captivated by her playful personality. Jumping to the conclusion she was Chinese, I hurried from the bathroom and displayed my new self to my astonished cousin.

"Take a picture, Margaret. Hurry. Madame Foo Ling won't be around for long," I heard myself saying. Since my cousin had no film, we



Margaret Runyan Castaneda (L) and Wanda Sue Parrott (R) in 1974. This photo was taken during Wanda's one-hour transformation into an Oriental-appearing woman.

broke the speed limit driving to the nearest 50-cent photo booth, where we both stuck our heads through the curtain and captured our images for posterity. Only one of us was recognizable. I was not there! Within an hour, my usual features had returned. Foo Ling was gone forever.

LESSONS TO LEARN

Can ordinary mortals transform into such exotic creatures as wolves, bears, crows, frogs or other persons? Until it happened to me, I really did not believe it was possible. Now I am left with several unanswered questions:

• Was Carlos responsible? Was he proving his claims were valid truths?

• Was my transformation the fruition of my long-unfulfilled childhood desire or was there some other meaning or purpose to it?

• If yes, was Foo Ling's image that of a Japanese soldier rather than Chinese woman?

• If I hadn't exited the bathroom, would I have continued transforming into a frog?

Perhaps no one—neither master performers like the Amazing Frogman nor sorcerers like Carlos Castaneda—possess all the answers. Traditionally, the Mystery Schools agree on one point: *when the student is ready, the teacher will appear; the true teacher points the student in the right direction, then lets him find his way through his own trials and errors.*

LESSONS APPLIED

Shortly after my brief Oriental transformation, my young son Teddy and I were exploring the desert near the Superstition Mountains east of Phoenix. We were returning to the car after digging up seashells from the top of the desert floor (it had once been an ocean bed) when the door slammed on Teddy's hand, literally mangling the life out of it. While Teddy screamed in pain, I watched with horror as the flesh blew up

like a bloody, purple balloon around his limp, twisted fingers.

"We've got to get to a hospital!" I thought, turning in a hopeless circle. For miles around us there was nothing but saguaro cacti and distant dusky mountains. I realized I was totally, helplessly lost. In despair, I uttered a silent cry for help.

Instantly I was infused with a peace and knowledge that exemplified the song which says "you fill up my senses." I knew what must be done, and I did it.

Holding my son's useless limb in my left palm, I used my right hand to gently stroke, caress, knead and remodel his flesh, just as if I were a potter creating a new form from virgin clay.

A few hours later, Teddy played in a series of snooker games and won every round. His hand was as good as new. Perhaps it *was* new.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

What was it Carlos had tried to tell me when I was just a tadpole struggling to become a frog? *Practitioners of magic are empowered with a sacred trust: responsibility for the welfare of their people.*

If this is true, it is not necessary for modern American shape-shifters to transform into wolves, bears, birds or frogs. To succeed as a true magician, all we need to be is Love.

